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Workers with disabilities get a boost from digital conversions

With 20 percent of its floor space consumed by file cabinets, the crowded Minnesota Department of Human Services realized it had a problem with paper.

The agency's solution might be a sign of things to come.

It hired 16 of its own clients with disabilities, trained them to convert paper documents to digital images, and 18 months later this corner of state government has 3.5 million fewer pages of documents in storage boxes.

"It was either this or look into 'bunk cubicles,'" said Monica Crocker, coordinator of the electronic docu-



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ment management system at the department.

Advocates for the disabled see digital conversions as a potential mother lode for their clients; Governments, banks, law firms and health care companies are all looking to the promise of computer disk storage to liberate them from their paper burdens. And conversions — especially the repetitive process of removing staples, tapping rips and opening folded papers so they can be electronically scanned — is ideal work for many with physical, cognitive or emotional disabilities.



Richard Green removed staples from documents in preparation for electronic scanning as part of efforts by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to reduce its paper storage needs. The program hires people with disabilities to do the preparation and scanning work.

Glen Stubbe/
Star Tribune

Digital conversions boost workers with disabilities

On top of that, this option I can make the labor-intensive process affordable to more employers. The Human Services Department pays \$7 an hour to this crew, compared with the \$28 an hour Crocker said she got in an open bidding process. Everyone on the work team gets \$6.15 of that \$7—the state's minimum wage.

"Good money," said an appreciative crew member, Trina Lewis.

The department was motivated to shrink its records to prepare to move some of its divisions into the new Elmer L. Andersen Human Services Building, which opened last weekend. The nature of its work requires lots of records and often long storage. For example, the files on people under public guardianship must remain intact through their lifetimes plus 20 years, Crocker said.

To get the job done, the department turned to the piece of its Minnesota State Operated Community Services that finds and supports employment for people with disabilities.

It provides 16 to 19 clients at a time, and some coaches to train and supervise them, placement coordinator Heidi Forbes said. The clients work four-hour shifts, and have organized themselves in four teams—the Early Birds, Vikings, Stars and Wild. Most of their work is "document preparation"—taking out staples and anything else needed to make a sheet of paper ready to be scanned. "Once they learn it, it's the same thing every day," Forbes said. "It's important to these people to be consistent. Change can be hard; repetitive is good."

"In fact, some of these folks have been successful here, after they hadn't been elsewhere," she said.

The department got the idea from the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. That advocacy agency converted all its paperwork, including decades of mental health research, to a website, council director Colleen Wieck said.

Wieck had read about an autistic man in Lodi, Calif., who was doing well converting city documents into electronic files.

"I thought, 'You gotta get this work done. You gotta hire people with disabilities.' A lot of forces came together," Wieck said.

She hired 18 people, who scanned documents for her for 16 months.

She and Forbes hope more employers will take time to learn about this as a possibility.

Besides the department Olmsted County's corrections department also has hired people with disabilities to help handle its documents.

She has had interest from a banker.

"And somebody in New Jersey found us by Googling 'disabilities' and 'digital imaging' and said, 'How do we set up a business to do this?'" Wieck said.

In the 1980s, the only place for people, with disabilities were in such jobs as fast food, laundry and janitorial. Now those agencies ask their clients what work might interest them, such as child care, and make every effort to accommodate them.

Everyone on the imaging projects chose to be there, she said.

"We've gone from supported employment to thinking in terms of, 'What's next for you?' even. 'What kind of career are you looking for?'" she said.

Greg Leuck, at the Department of Human Services, said he's learning FileNet software scanning in both black and white and color.

"I like that I'm getting experience," Leuck said. Co-worker Jeff Shaffer's previous job was packaging wood products and putting stickers on pipes at a state-run work shop.

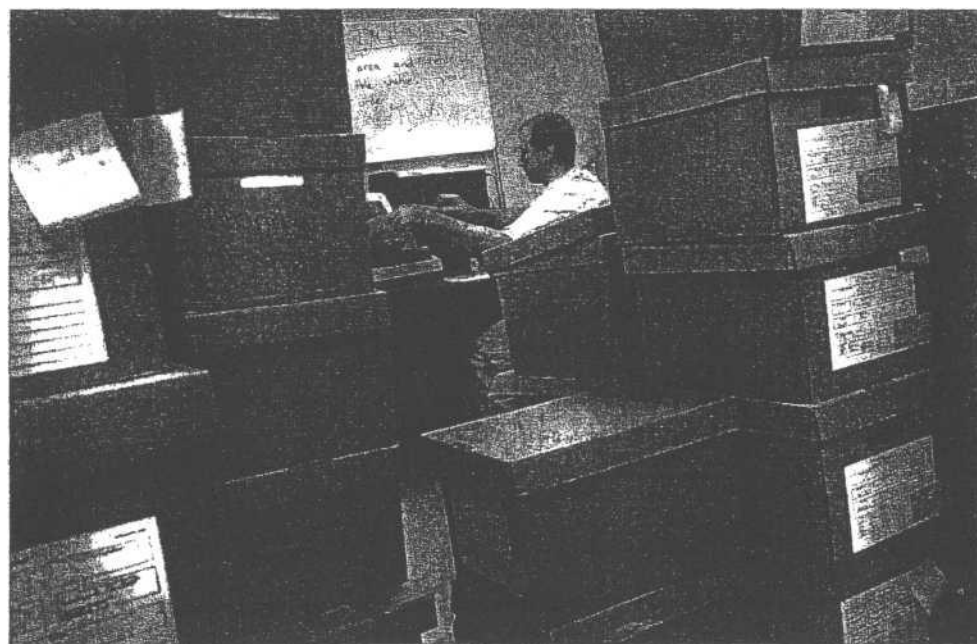
Working for the department is a big-deal job, Shaffer said.

"We're working for the state, and that means it's important," he said. "I never had a government job before."

What are your workplace issues? You can reach H.J. Cummins at workandlife@startribune.com. Please sign your e-mails; no names will appear in print without prior approval.



Job coach Gina Vogel worked with her team members, including Mike Blake, left, as they prepared documents for electronic scanning.



Photographs by Glen Stubbe/Star Tribune

Greg Leuck is part of the Minnesota Department of Human Services' efforts to reduce its paper storage needs. Files on people under public guardianship must remain intact through their lifetimes plus 20 years.